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Role of floating fishing villages in the social life of fishers in south central region*Nguyen Duy Thieu*

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ABSTRACT

Unlike the North and the South where abundance of freshwater, the marine capture fisheries is underdeveloped, the Central Coast, especially South Central Coast with little freshwater fisheries resources, but high amount of shrimps, fishes at sea, thus local fishermen have exploited this resource for living early. Together with this living process, Van Chai- a basic social unit, has been setup and gradually completed.

In tradition of social units, this level is both administrative unit and self-governing unit. It also carries out many functions: managing people, organizing production, belief life and controlling resources etc.

Since changes of traditional social system in Vietnam from three-level institution including Family – Village – State (“in home out village, in village out state”) to a five-level system: State (Central) - Province – District – Commune – Hamlet (village), functions of Van Chai has also been changed. Today, like agricultural villages, Van Chai only play their roles as self-governing unit besides supporting each other among its households in term of non-administrative internal works such as funeral ceremonies, marriage, festivals and so on, other functions such as managing resources go beyond responsibility of Van Chai recently.

These changes do not only affect fishermen’s life in many aspects but also resources protection. In current social circumstances, no one worries when resource is in exhausted. With above idea, the report will mention following contents:

1. Process for formation and development of Van Chai in South Central Coast
2. Functions of Van Chai in South Central Coast in traditional social life
 - + Function as a fishers managing unit
 - + Function as a production unit
 - + Function as a belief unit
 - + Function to control and protect fisheries resources
3. Changes on functions of Van Chai in current social life and corollaries from these changes

In the conclusion, some issues are raised for discussion: How to promote and inherit roles and functions of Van Chai under current developed process as well as arena of fisheries resource protection.

I. Establishment history of fisheries society in south central region

The sea provides humans with diversified and precious resources. However, compared to lowlands and uplands, few studies have been conducted on coastal areas, especially those concerning social and cultural aspects, so the documentation on the livelihood of the fishers is quite limited. Many interesting issues, including the formation of fishing communities, material, spiritual and religious life at sea and along the coastline, etc., are not been understood thoroughly.

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In an historical perspective, in spite of rich resources, the sea is always connected to severe climate conditions. A high degree of technical assistance is needed to exploit marine resources. As a result, humans went to the sea to make living only very late in their history.

In Vietnam, fishing activities in the lowland in the north and south are not impressive. This is because the Vietnamese are agriculturalists, who have tried to encroach upon the sea for farming activities. So we have planted mangrove trees, and conducted land reclamation to create the green fields along the coast. In the past, people in the north were not very familiar with marine fish and other seafood, so they applied many spices in cooking, to eliminate the marine fish taste to make it similar to that of freshwater fish.

Compared to northern lowlandes, people in the south started fishing much later. This area is rich in freshwater fish, so traditionally they have not been particularly eager for marine species.

In the central region, the situation is quite different. Marine currents bring large fish stocks to the coastal areas. In central region, the land is poor and narrow, with short, swift-flowing rivers, such that there are few freshwater fish. People living in these areas have selected the fishing boats for their living. It was supposed that this was inherited from Cambodians. However, this is just an idea because in reality, the group of Cambodian people living in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces have only one fishing village.

The movement towards the offshore areas created a new way of living for the people of the central region. In this presentation I introduce the establishment, structure and function of grassroots social units – *vạn chài* - of people in the central region. It is based on a survey conducted in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces.

II. Traditional social institution of fishing villages in south central region

Unlike the North Central Coast and Northern regions, few studies have been conducted on villages and social structure of the Vietnamese people along the South Central Coast, and we do not have reliable documentation in this regard. So what is presented here is based on documents collected during short surveys in some limited areas, and is not fully representative of the region. This is, therefore an initial study.

1. Structure of traditional Vietnamese villages in the south central region

It seems natural to talk about agricultural communities when referring to Vietnamese traditional villages. The establishment history of this social institution is closely related to the Vietnamese' territorial expansion toward the south. In 1693, Nguyen Lords started to conquer the south central region. In addition to the civil administrative apparatus, military forces were established to support the government. Soldiers of the local garrison were allowed to marry local women and establish villages, which were called "*Kinh Cựu*" villages. Afterwards, policies were issued to mobilize people from northern provinces,

e.g. Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, to reclaim more land in the south central region for farming and settlement.. The first batch of migration was undertaken through waterways to the coastal area of Hòn Đỏ and the migrants then set up makeshift cottages. On the one hand, the community established the social system for self-control, and on the other hand, Nguyen Dynasty applied the social organisation structure in the North to establish the administrative system in the south central at three levels: *Đạo* (province), *Tổng* (district) and *Làng* (village).

Đạo was equal to province, and Tong was a lower level including the groups of villages. For instances, *Tổng* Hạ Trường (in Ninh Hải, Ninh Thuận) includes the villages of An Xuân, An Hòa, Phước Nhơn, Mỹ Nhơn, Gò Thao, Gò Sạn, Gò Đèn, Hộ Diêm, Hòn Thiên, Phương Cựu, Bình Nghĩa, Tri Thủy, Dư Khánh, Tân An, Khánh Hội, Khánh Tường, Mỹ Hoà, Thái An, Vĩnh Hy. The person running the Tong was *Cai Tổng*, who was selected by Confucian scholars but not by the public. In some cases, the position was selected in advance and waited for royal appointment. It was traditionally called “*tổng dụng*”, or “awaiting leader” who would take over the charges of present *Cai Tổng*.

Below *Tổng*, villages were put under supervision by “*ngũ hương*” (five official ranks of the village), namely *Lý trưởng* (headman), *Phó lý* (assistant headman), *Hương việc* (secretary), *Hương mục* (person in charge of rituals), *hương kiểm* (village security officer). *Lý trưởng* assumed general administration with *Phó lý*’s support. *Hương việc* was in charge of clerical work, *Hương mục* took care of public works such as roads, temple, communal hall, pagoda etc, and *Hương kiểm* was assigned to maintain safety. Each village may consist of several hamlets. The Council of above-mentioned five positions was the self-controlled apparatus of the village. In addition to State obligations, such as tax collection, conscription for military service or public labor, this council was responsible for solving all internal issues of the village such as funerals, marriages, security, and ceremonies in the communal hall. Most of the people in the South Central region were migrants, so they pay great reverence to their ancestors. Village founders are worshipped as *thành hoàng* (tutelary god). In general, each village has one communal hall – a complex of five components with different religious functions: *đình trung – chánh điện* (Hall Centre – Main Palace) dedicated to the tutelary god, behind which is *tiền hiền* (Early Men of Merits) house dedicated to the first contributors of the temple construction; next to the *tiền hiền* house is a building for *tiên sư* (passed-away predecessors). The West wing of the communal hall is *lăng bà* (Goddesses’ Mausoleum), worshipping five goddesses of the five elements, Kim (Metal), Mộc (Wood), Thủy (Water), Hỏa (Fire), Thổ (Earth). East wing of the temple is the *Đại Khánh* (Great Happiness) house, where the village elders often held meetings. In front of the temple gate is a large stage for *hát bội* (traditional opera), and a place called *án phong*. Besides, there are a kitchen and some other supplementary buildings. Normally, each religious ceremony is held in three days, with different rituals of selected auspicious dates and time. For example, on the 1st day, the rite of *Nghinh thần* (Reception of the Lords) could be conducted at large-hour of the Monkey; on the 2nd day: the rite of *Đình trung* at large-hour of the Water Buffalo, the rite of *Tiền Hiền* at large-hour of the Dog, the rite of *Tiền Hiền* at large-hour of the Rat; on the 3rd day: the rite of “Thanks-giving” (to the gods and ancestors) at large-hour of the Snake. For major ceremonies, traditional opera and singing

troupes were often invited. Until the present, communal hall has remained very important for the spiritual life of the local communities.

2. Village – traditional social organization of fishers

What has been presented above are the livelihood activities of agricultural residents. Most fishers, however, are rooted from farming households. In the south central region, fishers once lived in the farmer's villages. For many reasons, they left the family to make a living by capturing fish, and become fishers. Initially, some residents gathered to conduct spiritual activities. Nevertheless, it is possible that most fishers left for fishing but came back to their home village after some time to join other social activities with the agricultural villagers. Gradually, the new living environment invoked new spiritual activities and forms for fishing community. *The need for gathering in spiritual activities prompted the establishment of social groups of "vạn".*

Before analyzing the structure and function of this social organization, we should clarify the concept of "vạn". In some Vietnamese dictionaries, *vạn* is defined as a village of fishers living on the water surface of river(s). Research on *vạn* from the North to North Central Coast confirmed that such definition is true. In the southern region, however, this concept is not correct, because a "village" in the region has different functions, and the structure of *van chai* is not the same as a firm as a village. For religious beliefs, *van chai* in the South Central Coast plays a crucial role in the community.

The difference is, *van chai* in the north has existed for long time, whereas fishing villages first emerged in the south in the 17th century, when the Vietnamese reclaimed more land in the South. At this time, the social management system of Nguyen Lords was loose, and was aimed first at managing agricultural villages. *Van chai* were self-established but played a key role for Nguyen Lords to administer the coastal communities and stabilise them for further expansion of the territory in the South. Migrants from the Northern provinces faced mounting challenges of the new unused land. The ones who wished to continue with agriculture decided to reclaim more farming land and set up villages under treatment policy by Nguyen Lords. In coastal areas, fishers had to establish their self-control structure of management, which are called *vạn* (or *van chai*). It was supposed that the structure was developed in to two stages:

- 1st stage

A group of fishers, possibly of the same originality, gathered to form a *van chai* and called it by either an old or new name. The first-comers, often the elders and experienced, were selected to lead this group. A leader of a *van chai* and his support personnel would then manage all livelihood and cultural activities, e.g. funeral, marriage, ritual ceremonies, and external relations of the *van chai*. Assisting the leader were a *huong văn* (secretary for clerical work), *chánh bái* (the position in charge of ritual ceremonies) and *thủ tự* (keeper of temple/pagoda). In this stage, *van chai* was the self-regulation unit, a nucleus of administrative and customary activities of the community.

- 2nd stage

When becoming stronger and capable of controlling the south central coast, the Nguyen Lords gradually established the government from hamlet, to district, and to commune levels. The administrative power of the State reached the fishermen's *van chai*. Since then, *van chai* had been under the charge of grassroots administrative unit of the State. The self-control apparatus of *van chai* was mainly for customary (spiritual) activities. Until the early stage of contemporary history, the functions of such apparatus were limited to festival organisation and encouragement of mutual assistance in livelihoods, and *van chai* was understood as a unit of spiritual activities of the fishers' in a certain area.

3. *Van chai* – a fishers' unit of spiritual activities

In modern times, in the area stretching from the South Central Coast to the South, the functions and formalities of *van chai* are substantially different from those in the north. Fishing communities gathered to conduct spiritual activities, notably for worshipping *ca Ong* (the whale), and the name of such communities is *van ca Ong*. Some mausoleums of the Whale were established and called *van* but not *đền* (temple) or *miếu* (shrine) in the north. There are two types of mausoleums: *lăng tổng đàn* constructed for a big community living around an estuary, and a smaller type for a single fishing village.

Whale mausoleum in Hai Chu village, Dong Hai commune, Phan Rang town, is an example of *lăng tổng đàn*. Old people said that, this temple was the common ritual place for the fishers living near Dinh River estuary, stretching from Vĩnh Hy to Cà Ná. The whole area of Ninh Thuan province was called *Tổng Kinh Dinh*, and previously this *Tổng* was as small as the *van chai* of Mang Rang when the Vietnamese of Kinh ethnicity first arrived. This Whale mausoleum, entitled Nam Hải, was also the favorite destination of visit for residents from other places. The mausoleum is situated in the central place of *Tổng Kinh Dinh*. Visitors coming here often burned incense and prayed for good luck, paid tax and discussed/notified with/by local government.

To meet the demand of spiritual life for fishers, Nam Hải Whale Mausoleum was built carefully over a large area of land. Its design includes two parts; one is for ritual activities, and the other is *Võ Ca* (singing and dancing), a stage for artistic performances. In addition to two small altars, one on the right dedicated to Heaven, the other on the left dedicated to Hell, the central chamber has three big altars: One in the middle is *tam lăng hội toà* dedicated to the a Council of Gods, the right altar for Quan Công (Guan Wenchang – a character in Chinese history), and left altar dedicated to *Thánh Mẫu* (the Holy Mother). On the right side of the chamber is an apartment keeping specimens of Whale skeleton, called *Linh cốt điện* (Palace of Holy Bones). In front of the chamber, *Ca Ong* mausoleum (keeping male whale skeleton) is on the right, and *Lăng Cô* (Lady's Mausoleum, keeping female whale skeleton) is on the left. It appears that the central altar is for various gods but not the Whale only.

Smaller in size, and built later, Nam Hải Whale mausoleum ở Khanh Hai hamlet, Tri Thuy, is another relic of *lăng tổng đàn*. Additionally, as mentioned above, each *van chai* has its own mausoleum. In such way, the word *van* also indicates a shrine of the Whale. It is reportedly said that in the South Central Coast, Whale mausoleums or temples were built with such makeshift material as thatch and bamboos. When fishers became better-off, they started constructing them with better material and in nicer design. In terms of architecture, a *van* or *lang* comprises of three parts:

- Central part: Conserving a Whale skeleton, with title tables of the Water God, Tiền hiền (Early Men of Merits), Hậu hiền (Later Men of Merits)
- Rear part: For meetings, guest reception, and logistic service.
- Front part is Võ Ca, for artistic performances of *tuong*, *cheo*, *ba trao*, etc. in festivals

In the front square, there is a New Year's tree, and two graves of whale called *Nam Hải linh phần* (Holy Grave of the Southern Sea Lords). *Mẫu Thủy* (Mother of Water) altar is placed nearby.

It is interesting that the mausoleum is always built near rivers, sea or swamp, and it should look over to the sea or river, so that fishers may see and pray from the front at a long distance. This also helps facilitate the carrying of whale skeletons in major ceremonies.

The whale is the most respected fish, for people believe that it saves human lives in disasters at sea. Fishers often tell each other stories about the kindness of the fish in salvaging fishing vessels/boats from offshore. The gratitude has eventually developed to a religious belief of the whale. When a dead whale is found, fishers call it “*Ông lụy*” (the Lord of Great Sadness), and the person who finds this first must report it to all men of the *van chai*, who will assemble to carry the whale body to the temple for wrapping and burial. The first finder of the whale has to observe three years of mourning, as is the same for his relatives of higher ranks (e.g., parents, grandparents). After three years, the community organises a ceremony to excavate the grave, disinter and clean the bones with wine, and bring the cleaned skeleton (called *Ngọc cốt*, or the Bones of Jade) to the main altar. Then the mourning period is declared over.

A worshipping ceremony of the whale may be different from place to place, but normally it is as follows:

+ *First day afternoon*: fishers take a palanquin to the river/sea, read holy quotes and/or sing *ba trao* (rowing) traditional songs, and then carry the skeleton back to the temple.

+ *Second day early morning*: A pig is slaughtered for the *Cáo yết* rite. The back and belly parts of the pig are cooked, and the remaining raw meat is placed in the central section. People start with the ceremonies of offering betel leave, wine, and read the title conferment sheets given to the *van chai* by the King, along with some singing and dancing performances.

In the afternoon, *Khai Diên* rite is staged, with singing and dancing performances at the Vo Ca house.

Over time, the Kings of Nguyen Dynasty gave honour titles to the dead Whales at different *van chai*, but the title conferment sheets often have the same content, addressing the whale as:

- *Đông Hải Cự Tộc Ngọc Lân Tôn Thần* (His Excellency the *Ngoc Lan* God of the Eastern Sea)

- *Nam Hải Cự Tộc Ngọc Long Tôn Thần* (His Excellency the *Ngoc Long* Dragon God of the Southern Sea)

- *Ngài Nam Hải Đại tướng quân* (His Excellency the Marshal of the Southern Sea).

Fishers' communities often produced long written statement of laudatory expressions in Chinese, to praise the ethics and deeds of the Whale.

+ *Third day*: Farewell to the souls of the Whale and other gods/goddesses who return to the sea.

Costs for these ceremonies will be covered by voluntary contribution of fishers.

The fishers' reverence of the whale is absolute. The Whale is called by "Cá Ông" (His Excellency), or respectfully addressed as *Ngài* (Sir), whale skeleton is called "*ngọc cốt*" (The Bones of Jade), and whale worshipping places are called as *lăng* (mausoleum) or *dinh* (temple). Any profanity against the Whale would be reprimanded by the community.

Such facts, though insufficient, help us to partly describe the formation history of *van chài* in a broader scene of the Vietnamese' settlement history in the south. The local socio-political context made its grassroots social unit of *van chai* very different from that in the North and North Central Coast.

III. Role of *van chài* in the South Central Coast

A society of fishermen living in the South Central Region is not really linked to the agricultural activities, like it is in North or South Vietnam. The *van chai*, a grassroots-level social unit, has been in existence for centuries, and has many functions, e.g. governance, security, organization for fishing activities, conducts of funeral, marriage, disaster relief, spiritual ceremonies and simple form of resource conservation.

Like other traditional grassroots social unit in Vietnam, the *van chai* considers the customary laws as the means to regulate activities. A customary bill usually consists of three parts: anchoring places and order of vessels, fishing rights, and simple protection of fishing grounds and resources.

- Residential rights

Though the *van chai* is for itinerant fishermen, it does not necessarily mean that they live on the water surface all the time. Traditionally, fishers live both on water surface of rivers or the sea, and on land. Local residents have better access to fishing grounds of fixed gears where the catches are stable and high.

As a rule, outsiders are not allowed to previously acquired fishing grounds but to move between these grounds temporarily. If ‘migrant fishers’ wish to anchor in a *van chai*, they need to have permission of the local community.

- Fishing rights

Generally, riverine and coastal fishing grounds are under indigenous people’s control by setting up fixed fishing lots. Offshore waters are open to everybody, regardless of origin. However, according to custom, first-comers are given priorities on the following principles:

- If a fishing net follows the water current, newcomers can cast their net only after the first comers have done so, and are not allowed to make changes to the positions of the long lines laid by the first-comers, regardless of the effect of water current on net positions.
- In case a fish school is found in the fishing ground, the first-comers have the priority to cast their net first, and the newcomers need to avoid the nets.

Most fishers clearly understand and strictly comply with these regulations, so disputes rarely happen among them.

- Protection of common resources

Before the 1960s, aquatic resources in fresh-, brackish- and marine water bodies were abundant, the price was very low. In those days, fish could not be transported over long distance, owing to the lack of techniques and skills for conservation. So the environment was safe; fisheries resources were not depleted and fishing pressure was not such as to require conservation measures. However, some customary laws were developed to restrict the use of destructive such methods as fish stupeficients (poisons) that may cause fish mass-mortality, small mesh nets, etc. Traditionally, fishing is seasonal. Fishers are only engaged in fishing activities after the *Cầu Ngư* (Good Catch Expectation) festival in January and before the “Thanks-giving” festival, in mid-Autumn. They believed that the ones fishing in the remaining period of the year would be punished. Resources would have time for reproduction/rehabilitation in this period.

IV. Changing traditions...

Previously society was stable, with little change in population. The resource base was in balance and human demand was low. Under such circumstances unwritten laws were highly respected, and the protection of resources was not of high priority.

But from the mid-20th century, numerous changes, including the depletion of resources and evolving social structure for resource management have occurred.

- There is a high pressure on the use of marine fisheries which has been developed rapidly since 1960. Before 1960 or 1975 the demand for fish resources was extremely low. After 1975, this demand started soaring, and aquatic resources have been exploited heavily to meet it, leading to a boom in labour force. Traditionally, only some fishing communities specialized in the fishing. Nowadays, fishing communities have invested intensively in fishing gears. Fishers are generally poor, so most of them have to move to other places for reclamation, and leave fishing grounds to newcomers, but investors focus on the profit and usually ignore conventions. Fishers either go to other places or use the obsolete fishing gear, causing the depletion of fisheries resources.

- The social structure for resource management has therefore been changed: From very early days, the central state tried by all means to control the village/*vạn* level. Fishers were allowed to catch fish but they had to pay tax and report to the government. The government collected taxes after a bidding process in the places where *in situ* fishing right licensing was applicable, and in areas of fishing right overlaps, the state would control and collect tax selectively for fishing gears. Protection of fisheries resources was not paid much attention by governments of different historical periods, so the customary laws of the fishing communities are almost forgotten. The space for capture fisheries, for the time being, does not have room for such traditional laws on resource management to exist.

To sum up, we would like to raise the two issues for discussion, as follows:

- We should not be over-confident that customary laws, if any, could replace current provisions of laws and regulations on fisheries resources management.

- More studies should be conducted by current authorities to provide a better understanding of the social unit of *vạn chài*. For co-management of small areas, regulations should be formulated for a community-based approach, and local communities should be legally empowered for the sustainable management of fisheries resources.

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